



History Essay Writing in Algerian Higher Education

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Abstract:

To study history is to do history. And the only way we can do history is to examine the available records from the past and then write about them. So, doing history means writing history. As you write, you demonstrate evidence and produce a logical argument. An essay, in general, is a short piece of writing on a particular subject, especially one done by students as part of the work for a course. For students of English, writing history essays is not an easy task because they are different from other forms of essays. History essays depend on interpretation, debate, analysis, and synthesis. They are more than narrative accounts of the past. This paper will define history essays and demonstrate the challenges students face when they write them. This paper will also provide an example of the third-year students of English from the Department of English at Echahid Cheikh Larbi Tebessi University. The results will provide some recommendations to overcome students' difficulties when dealing with history essay writing.

Keywords: *Algerian, Higher, Education, History, Essay, Writing*

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing refers to a particular style of expression researchers use to define the intellectual boundaries of their disciplines and areas of expertise. Writing is considered the most essential language skill that students require for their personal development and academic success. The most common reasons for writing include: 'to report on a piece of research the writer has conducted', 'to answer a question the writer has been given or given', 'to discuss a subject of common interest and give the writer's view', 'to synthesize research done by others on a topic' (Bailey, 2011).

Because most examinations and assignments students do at university are mainly assessed through writing, the latter is considered the most crucial skill students require for academic advancement. To reach academic success, students need to know what is an academic essay which is one of the types of academic writing that are defined as "...a written text, rarely fewer than 500 words or more than 5,000 words in length, on a topic related to a course taught at a school, college, or university" (Soles, 2010, p. 6). An Academic essay requires "a formal style'..., 'a formal structure- an introduction, the main part, and a conclusion; 'analytical thinking-that is the argument which shows you have analyzed the information from your reading or research in a critical way'; careful proofreading..." (Shields, 2010, p 10

Students at university study several modules and subject matters such as History; they need to write about it in essays. The writing of 'history' essays involves following the same structured approach as in other subject areas. However, the 'evidence' they use to support their analysis of historical events is subject-specific (Shiach, 2009, p. 90). They need to know the 'facts and historical factors that have shaped important events, and they must be able to select from the knowledge they have acquired to enhance their general statement in their essays.

In his book, *Writing History Essays: A Student's Guide*, Mabbett (2007) focused on four fundamental principles of history essays that are essential in any given history essay, and he considered them to be the main needed elements that a history essay should contain. He proclaims that History essay is 'history', 'academic', 'essay', and it is 'literature' (p. 13).

After the results of the First Semester were revealed, many students could have achieved better grades, especially in the History and Civilization modules. History essay writing could have been understood better, if not at all, by Third Year students (LMD)⁷ and this accounts for their failure in the module and to fail scoring good grades in it. So, I decided to investigate the issue and search to see where the problem began and why they could have scored better grades in the History and Civilization modules when it came to writing about them.

1. Method

1.1 Participants

The participants of this study are Third-year students (LMD) who are students of English Language and Letters at the Department of English in the University of Echahid Cheikh Larbi Tebessi- Tebessa-, the school year 2021/2022. The number of participants was 30; they were selected because they were Third-year students considered graduate-level learners.

1.2 Materials

A paper questionnaire of 22 questions was addressed to the participants to conduct the study. the questions were about writing essays, in general, and history essays, in particular. The questions varied between 'Yes/No' and 'Choice'. The number of answers was counted, and the numbers were transformed into percentages and rates.

1.3 Procedure

Because of the low scores after the First Exam was passed in the module of 'Study of Civilization Texts' in the Third Year (LMD), the decision was made to conduct a questionnaire to investigate the reasons for failure in writing history essays. Right after the results were revealed, paper questionnaires were distributed to the students to get clear answers to the questions. Students were asked to bring the answers back within a week.

1.4 Results

After obtaining the questionnaire, participants' answers were calculated and assessed to provide the acquired results to reach the needed quest and solve the spotted problem.

Table 1. The Difficulty of Studying History

What makes History challenging to be studied?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
1-Writing History Essays	60%	18
2-Providing evidence and arguments	40%	12
Total		30

Table1 shows students' choices when they were asked about the difficulty of History as a module to be studied; 18 that is 60% of them said that they find History difficult because they have to write essays about it, and 12 of them composed 40% said that they find it difficult because they have to provide evidence. They have to enhance their proof through arguments that are needed to write the essays.

Table 2. Essay Writing

Is Writing Essays easy for you as a Third-Year student?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	53.33%	16
No	46.66%	14
Total		30

Table 2 is about whether writing essays is easy for third-year students (LMD). 16 (53.33%) out of 30 students stated that it is easy for them to write essays, whereas 14 (46.66%) said they do not find it easy to write essays. The question deals with essays in general and has yet to specify which kind of essays students know how to write essays, and that is quite obvious since they are advanced learners.

Table 3. Reasons for difficulty in writing Essays

What makes essays difficult to write?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
1-I cannot build a good essay	46.66%	14
2-I need to learn how to move from the introduction to the body and conclusion.	46.66%	14
3-I sometimes do not understand the question at all.	6.66%	02
Total		30

Table3 shows students were asked about the reasons why they find it challenging to write essays; 14 (46.66%) out of 30 said that they could not compose a good essay, and equally, 14 (46.66%) of them said that they do not know how to organize their essay and they do not know how to move from one step to another. Just 02 of the 30 students said they sometimes do not understand the exam question. Students' problems generally lie mainly in their need for a coherent essay that respects the flow of ideas and the link between them.

Table 4. History as an Interpretation Discipline

Do You think that History is a Discipline based on interpretation?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	30%	09
No	70%	21
Total		30

Table4 demonstrates that students were asked about the nature of History as a discipline and whether it needs an interpretation; just 9 (30%) of them said it is; on the other hand, 21 (70%) said it is not. Students tend to refrain from using their critical thinking in History because they think it is a story-telling module without reading between the lines.

Table 5. History and Narration

In the History Exam, do you narrate?		
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Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	73.33%	22
No	23.33%	08
Total		30

Table 5 shows that 22 (73.33%) out of 30 students narrate when they have a History Exam, and just 08 (23.33%) do not narrate. Because as stated earlier, students do not consider History as an interpretation discipline that needs arguments and personal involvement in interpreting and arguing issues. They narrate when they have a history exam.

Table 6. History and Arguments

Do you provide arguments while writing history essays?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	36.66%	11
No	63.33%	19
Total		30

Table 6 shows that 19 out of 30 students do not provide arguments and do not use critical analysis while writing history essays; it also shows that 11 of them use critical analysis and provide arguments in their history essays. Giving arguments in History essays is always challenging for students; they do not provide arguments because they think History does not need to.

Table 7. Judging the Past by Today's Standards

When you write history essays, do you judge the past by today's standards?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	56.66%	17
No	43.33%	13
Total		30

Table 7 demonstrates that 17 (56.66%) out of 30 students judge the past by today's standards, and they read the past without the context of time. On the other hand, 13 (43.33%) of the students said they do not judge the past by today's standards and read the past in the context of time. This is one of the most important reasons students score bad grades in History because they think in present norms while writing about the past.

Table 8. Judging the Past on the Weight of Evidence

Do you base your judgment on the weight of the evidence?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	40%	12
No	60%	18
Total		30

Table 8 shows that students when they were asked about their judgment, whether they base it on evidence and provide proof or just judge without evidence, just 12 (40%) of them said they base their judgment on solid evidence, and 18 (60%) of them said that they do not base their judgment on evidence and they judge.

Table 9. Writing Strategies

Do you use the three strategies: Prewriting while writing and Post Writing when you write essays?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	33.33%	10
No	66.66%	20
Total		30

Table 9 presents the students' answers to their use of the three strategies of writing; more than half of them need to apply the strategies of writing when they write essays, which are 20

(66.66%) out of 30. The other 10 (33.33%) students confirmed using the three strategies when writing essays. One of the areas for improvement in students' writing is that they need to depend on clear strategies that allow them to achieve a successful piece of writing; that is revised several times.

Table 10. Thesis Statement Creation

Do you create your thesis statement right after reading the question?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	30 %	09
No	70%	21
Total		30

Table 10 represents students' choices concerning creating a thesis statement after reading the question during exams; the vast majority (21) (70%) said that they did not create a thesis statement when they read the question first. On the other hand, just 09 (30%) said they created their thesis statement right after reading the question; this is fine in students' writing because it can be done first or later after brainstorming their ideas.

Table 11. Brainstorming Ideas

Do you brainstorm ideas after reading the question?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes, I do!	83.33%	25
No, I do not. I determine the key points I need to address and then brainstorm ideas to support my points.	16.66 %	05
Total		30

Table 11 demonstrates the issue of brainstorming ideas in exams; most students brainstormed after reading the exam paper, with 25 participants out of 30 (83.33%). However, just 05 (16.66%) of the participants said they determine the critical points they address and brainstorm ideas that support their points. Brainstorming ideas without defining the key points can cost students good grades because brainstorming can be the step in drafting the essay rather than a final step.

Table 12. The Purpose of Thesis Statement

What is the purpose of the thesis statement?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
1-Summarize the critical arguments of the essay into one strong statement.	30%	09
2-Present the topic of the essay.	30%	09
3-Tell the reader what the essay is about.	30%	09
4-Help guide your writing and keep your argument focused.	06.66%	02
5-All of the above.	03.33%	01
Total		30

Table 12 showed the students' choices when they were asked about the importance of the thesis statement; 09 (30%) of them said that it summarizes the key argument of the essay into one strong statement, and 09 (30%) others said that it presents the topic essay, 09 (30%) also said it tells the reader what the essay about is. The three first students equally chose the first three choices, but 02 (06.66%) of them said it helps guide their writing and keeps their argument focused, and just 01 (03.33%) of them had chosen all the given choices, stating that all the choices are a clear definition of the importance of the thesis statement.

Table 13. Opening the Introduction Paragraph

In writing your introduction paragraph, do you open it with a broad statement?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
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Yes	50%	15
No	50%	15
Total		30

Table 13 shows students' responses when asked about opening their introductions with broad statements; half of the participants said yes, they do that 50%, and the other half (15), (50%) of them said they did not.

Table 14. Construction of the introduction Paragraph

Should each sentence be more specific and detailed in the introduction paragraph?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	46.66%	14
No	53.33%	16
Total		30

Table 14 represents students' knowledge about constructing the introduction paragraph, where they were asked about sentences that compose it and whether their sentences go more specific and detailed or not, this question is a continuity of the previous one; 14 of them said yes, and 16 of them said no.

Table 15. The Position of the Thesis Statement

Should the thesis statement conclude the introduction paragraph?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	56.66%	17
No	43.33%	13
Total		30

Table 15 demonstrated students' answers when they were asked about the position of the thesis statement; 17 (56.66%) of them said that it should be at the end of the introduction paragraph, and 14 (43.33%) of them said it should not be at the end of the introduction paragraph.

Table 16. The body of the essay

The body of your essay is where the majority of your work appears.		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	86.66%	26
No	13.33%	04
Total		30

Table 16 shows students' choices when they were asked about the body of their essays, whether it contains the majority and details of their work or not; the majority of the respondents said that the body of the essay is where they show the whole work in details, and just 04 of them said the body of the essay is not the right place for the majority of the work.

Table 17. Paragraphs and Ideas

Would your essay's body contain paragraphs where each of them discusses one idea?		
Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	33.33%	10
No	66.66%	20
Total		30

Table 17 represents participants' answers about the ideas in the body of their essays and whether the paragraphs contain one idea for each; 10 out of 30 students said they wrote one idea in one paragraph. However, more than half the 20 (66.66%) said they do not write one idea per paragraph.

Table 18. The Use of First-Person Pronouns in History Essays

Do you use the first person in your history essays?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	73.33%	22
No	26.66%	08
Total		30

Table 18 shows that the majority that is 22 (73.33%) of the students use the first-person pronoun when they write history essays when they do not have to use it, and just 08 (26.66%) do not use it in their history essays.

Table 19. Definitives in History Essays

Do you use definitive's 'Never' and 'Always' in your history essays?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	90%	27
No	10%	03

Table 19 represented students' answers when they were asked about their use of the definitive words such as 'Never' and 'always' in history essays; the vast majority that is 27 (90%) of them said they use those words in their history essays, and just a very few that is 03 (10%) of them said they do not use definitives.

Table 20. Conclusion Paragraph

Choose the correct answer/answers.

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
a- A conclusion is the right place to introduce a new point.	6.66%	02
b- A conclusion should wrap up your main ideas.	46.66%	14
c- A conclusion is the closure of your main ideas	46.66%	14
Total		30

Table 20 shows students' views about writing their conclusion paragraphs and their functions; just very few (02) of them said that the conclusion is the right place to introduce a new point, and 14 of them said that the conclusion should wrap up the main ideas, the rest 14 participants said that the conclusion is the closure of the main ideas.

Table 21. Tenses in History Essays

Which tense do you use when you write your history essays?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
a-Past tense	56.66%	17
b-present tense	43.33%	13
Total		30

Table 21 demonstrates students' choices regarding the use of tenses in writing their history essays; 17 (56.66%) of the participants said they use the simple past tense in writing history essays, and 13 (43.33%) of them said that they use the present tense in their history essays.

Table 22. History Essays

Did you thoroughly study History Essays in the Written Comprehension and Expression Module?

Answer Choice	Rate	Number
Yes	13.33%	04

No	86.66%	26
Total		30

Table 22 represents students' responses when they were asked about their deep knowledge of history essays through studying them in another module that is typically concerned with writing; a considerable number (26) of the participants said that they did not study History essays in detail in their Written Comprehension and Expression module whereas just 04 of them said they did.

1.5. Discussion

CONCLUSION

History essay writing in university presents a problem for students who need to learn about writing essays in general and in particular. Students need to respect the academic characteristics of writing and learn how to organize their ideas and compose successful essays, which is why they do not score high grades in the modules of History and Civilization.

Students confirmed that writing about History is the most challenging part of studying it, and that is because of specific techniques that are typical to history essays. Because History essays require interpretation, students fail to fulfill it; they narrate, thinking that History is story-telling. Thus, they do not provide arguments.

Regarding judging the past by today's standards, students think without referring to the context of time. Students also do not know how to organize their ideas when they first encounter their exam papers; they brainstorm without a clear structure for the essay. They do not create thesis statements, and they do not know where to insert them if they know them. For constructing the essay, students know the different components but need to learn how to move from the introduction to the body and the conclusion.

For the use of personal pronouns, which are not supposed to be in history essays, students do use them; they also do not use the past tense as the primary tense for the history essays. They use definitive that is supposed to be in something other than history essays.

As a recommendation, I suggest that teachers of Written Comprehension and Expression explain more about essay writing to the students and allow them repeatedly to be exposed to more practice of writing; I also suggest that History and Civilization teachers should teach their students the main principles of history essay writing before they teach them about History. They have to devote more sessions to teaching them how to write history essays because it is the primary tool for evaluating them.

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